

What Are Free Modifiers in English Grammar?

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Free Modifiers: Definition, Usage, and Examples

Understanding the grammar concept

[SVG

Image]

A free modifier adds detail or information to a previous clause. Maskot / Getty Images

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Definition:

Generally, a free modifier is a [phrase](#) or [clause](#) that [modifies](#) either the [main clause](#) or another free modifier. Phrases and clauses that can function as free modifiers include [adverb phrases](#), [adverbial clauses](#), [participial phrases](#), [absolute phrases](#), and [resumptive modifiers](#).

Free modifiers can come in several forms. There is no single format or construction required, but many of them will use the present participle form of a verb. Most of the time, these phrases will give more information about the subject, further developing it or adding specificity. A free modifier phrase is not necessary to the sentence (the main clause will still be grammatically and logically sound without it), but enhances it with further ideas or details.

However, as show below (in Examples and Observations), not all [linguists](#) and [grammarians](#) use the term *free modifier* in the same way to refer to the same kind(s) of construction.

See also:

- [Adverbial](#)
- [Apposition](#)
- [Cumulative Sentence](#)
- [Modifier](#)
- [Nonrestrictive Elements](#)
- [Sentence Adverb](#)
- [Summative Modifier](#)

- [Temporal Adverbial](#)

Examples and Observations:

- "Consider this sentence from [E.B.] White's essay ['The Essayist and the Essayist']: The essayist is the self-liberated man, sustained by the childish belief that everything he thinks about, everything that happens to him, is of general interest. (paragraph 1) The most important feature of this sentence is its use of the **free modifier**, which begins at the comma with a [past participle](#) ('sustained') and continues to the end of the sentence, even though it contains several other parts such as [prepositional phrases](#) and [dependent clauses](#). The second most important feature--and the one that gives the sentence its [rhythm](#)--is the repetition of the word *everything* and its own small dependent clause."

(Steven M. Strang, *Writing Exploratory Essays: From Personal to Persuasive*. McGraw-Hill, 1995)

- (18) The piano stood beside the bookcase.

(19) The piano deteriorated in the conservatory.

"Turning to the adverbial phrases of (18) and (19), we find that they are not quite identical in status . . . , although they can each be regarded as constituting an adverbial. The phrase *in the conservatory* in (19) is a **free modifier** adverbial . . . of a type that can appear in any sentence. In sentence (18), on the other hand, the adverbial *beside the bookcase* has a special link to the [lexical verb](#) *stand*, which belongs to a set of verbs (including also *stand*, *lie*, *live*, *reside*, *last*, etc.) that are incomplete without a following adverbial of the [category](#) appropriate for the verb in question: for instance, *stand* requires an [adverbial of place](#), *last* requires an adverbial of duration. In such cases the adverbial can be regarded as part of the valency requirement of the verb, in other words, as an *adverbial elaborator* of the verb . . ."

(D. J. Allerton, *Stretched Verb Constructions in English*. Routledge, 2002)

- **Free Modifiers in [Generative Rhetoric](#)**

"The most 'natural' place to add a 'loose' or **free modifier** . . . is in a [postmodifier](#) slot, located after the noun or verb it modifies. Physically, the sentence keeps moving across the page, but cognitively/rhetorically, the sentence pauses. . . .

"The usual function of free modifiers, [Francis] Christensen asserts, is to specify (and/or concretize) what they modify.

How grateful they were for the coffee, she looking up at him, tremulous, her lips pecking at the cup, he blessing the coffee as it went down her. (John

Updike)

The postmodifiers here break 'they' into 'she' and 'he,' and then concretize how each was grateful. Similarly, 'her lips pecking at the cup' concretizes 'tremulous.'"

(Richard M. Coe, "Generative Rhetoric." *Theorizing Composition: A Critical Sourcebook of Theory And Scholarship in Contemporary Composition Studies*, ed. by Mary Lynch Kennedy. IAP. 1998)

- **Two Types of Free Modifiers**

"[Joost] Buysschaert ["Criteria for Classification of English Adverbials," 1982] distinguishes between [complements](#) and **free modifiers**. The distinction is basically a [syntactic](#) one. . . . Complements invariably go in end position; hence if an adverbial occurs in front or medial position, it is a free modifier.

"There are two types of free modifiers. V[erb]-modifying and S[entence]-modifying. The former type adds 'information about the action, process or state described in the relation denoted by the verb. This information is not relevant to the rest of the proposition' (1982: 87). The latter type modifies the entire proposition. Front position is said to be reserved for S-modifiers; thus if an adverbial can be [fronted](#), it is an S-modifying free modifier. However, according to Buysschaert, some S-modifiers are locked in medial position and cannot be fronted, e.g. *just, ever, still*. In such cases the distinguishing criterion is not mobility, but the semantic scope of the adverbial, i.e. it should modify the whole proposition, not just the relation expressed by the verb."

(Hilde Hasselgård, *Adjunct Adverbials in English*. Cambridge University Press, 2010)

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